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ABSTRACT

To set the scene, this report begins with the description of the classroom practice and activities of an English teacher at a technical high school in Miami. The report states that a number of the activities that occurred in the class constitute what many scholars in the field of English/language arts studies consider examples of best, or exemplary, practice. The report explains that some of the prominent components of English in the classroom studied are: silent reading, demonstrating knowledge, interdisciplinarity, classroom conversation, and written and oral communication skills. It also describes the teacher's professional contexts, including the following: the district, the school, and the academy in which she works; the colleagues, administrators, and district personnel with whom she works; the various organizations to which she belongs and with which she interacts; and the professional activities in which she engages. (NKA)

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# CELA RESEARCH REPORT

## VOCATIONAL SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER ENGAGES STUDENTS IN HIGH LEVELS OF READING AND WRITING: THE CASE OF JANAS MASZTAL

STEVEN OSTROWSKI

CASE STUDY NUMBER 12006

NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTER ON

ENGLISH LEARNING & ACHIEVEMENT

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S.O.

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The Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA) is a national research and development center located at the University at Albany, State University of New York, in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Additional research is conducted at the Universities of Georgia and Washington.

The Center, established in 1987, initially focused on the teaching and learning of literature. In March 1996, the Center expanded its focus to include the teaching and learning of English, both as a subject in its own right and as it is learned in other content areas. CELA's work is sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education, as part of the National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment.

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## Foreword

The school door you will open as you read this case study reveals a very special place. Here students are actively involved in becoming highly literate; they are learning how language works in context and how to use it to advantage for specific purposes. Here, too, teachers are supported in their efforts to improve their teaching and to grow as professionals.

What makes this kind of environment possible? A team of field researchers and I have been exploring this question in a major five-year project for the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA). This case study is one part of that project, which involves 15 other English programs nationwide. Each is providing English instruction to middle and high school students. Most are exemplary; some are more typical and give us points of contrast. Overall our study examines the contexts that lead to thought-provoking learning in English classes and the professional contexts that support such learning. This case report offers a portrait of one teacher within the contexts of both her school and her profession. We offer it to provide food for thought and a model for action for readers or groups of readers who wish to improve the English language arts learning of their own students.

The programs we are studying represent great diversity in student populations, educational problems, and approaches to improvement. The reports and case studies that comprise this project (listed on page 34) do not characterize programs as process-oriented, traditional, or interdisciplinary. Instead, they provide a conception of what "English" is as it is enacted in the classrooms of our best teachers, how these teachers have reconciled the various voices and trends within the professional community in their own practices, how their schools and districts support and encourage their efforts, and how in turn the contexts they create in their classrooms shape the high literacy learning of their students. The results have implications for curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as well as policy decisions, in English and the language arts.

For my first cross-cutting report, *Excellence in English in Middle and High School: How Teachers' Professional Lives Support Student Achievement* (CELA Report #12002), I analyzed the data across all case studies for overarching patterns. In it, I identify and discuss particular features of teachers' professional experiences that permeate these special programs.

I am profoundly grateful for the cooperation and vision of the teachers and administrators who contributed their time and ideas so generously and so graciously to this project. It was indeed a privilege for the field researchers and me to enter into their worlds of learning – a place I now invite you to visit and learn from in the following pages.

Judith A. Langer
Director, CELA
July 1999

# Vocational School English Teacher Engages Students in High Levels of Reading and Writing: The Case of Janas Masztal

Steven Ostrowski

*It's another warm, blue-skied morning at William Turner Technical Arts High School, in the inner city of Miami. As the students in Janas Masztal's[1] second period English class enter their air-conditioned portable classroom in the school's Agriculture Academy, they find listed on the front board the activities that will engage them for the next hour and forty minutes, along with the approximate number of minutes to spend on each. Masztal banters with the arriving students, asking Juan how he did in his baseball game last night, how Sharrisse's and Ellen's agriculture project is progressing, if anybody knows how William, who has been out sick for several days, is feeling.*

*For these tenth-grade students, most of whom Masztal characterizes as "former reluctant readers," the first activity in English class is always Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). For fifteen very quiet minutes, the mix of Hispanic, African American, Asian American and Caucasian students engage with classic and young adult novels, science and sports magazines, or* The Miami Herald *(with which the school enjoys a partnership). As soon as she can get her preliminary morning duties completed, Masztal, too, picks up a book and sits down to read. Curious, a young woman in the front row leans up to see what her teacher is reading these days: it's a book of Walt Whitman's poetry.*

*At a certain point Masztal informs the class that they have two more minutes to read (a few students groan with disappointment), and to try, if possible, to get to the end of a chapter, section or page. When reading time is over, students know to take out their journals and begin writing reflections based on what they've been reading. Today, however, Masztal announces that the group will not write in their journals but, because she is collecting them, instead will go through all the entries since the last time she collected the journals and, with their various colored highlighters, highlight the ideas in each passage they've written that they think are most important, most interesting, most likely to be something they might return to and write more about later. After about ten minutes, as students complete the highlighting, Masztal collects the journals. Over the weekend she'll read them and, in an ongoing conversation with the students about their ideas and responses to the various readings they've been doing, she will write her own comments below their entries.*

*Masztal and her class have been involved in a year-long, interdisciplinary (history and English), multifaceted, themed project dedicated to exploring the essential question, "What is America?" (for more detail on this project, see page 17). Today, toward the exploration of that overarching question, as well as toward other more specifically literary ends, the class will read, discuss, and compare Walt Whitman's poem, "I Hear America Singing," and R.L. Duffus' essay, "I Am an American." "Oh, yes. You will also," Masztal says in a mischievously provocative tone, "be performing before the morning's over." Student reactions vary from sportscaster-like shouts of "Yes!" to mock groans.*

*When students have found Whitman's poem in their textbooks (Masztal varies textbook use with novels and hand-outs), the teacher asks for volunteers to read. No shortage of hands rise. A young woman near the back reads the introductory paragraph, which gives a brief overview of Whitman and his times, an overview which Masztal then supplements orally and informally with information not mentioned in the text.*

*Next, the entire poem is read aloud, in turn by several students, some who have volunteered and a few who have been called on. When the reading is finished, Masztal pauses, her finger rubbing her chin, and says, "We've been talking about what America is from lots of different perspectives this year. What does Walt Whitman think America is?"*

*As usual, numerous hands fly up. As students offer their answers, Masztal writes on the board:*

> *America is the working class.*
> *Americans are self-centered.*
> *Americans go their own way; do their own thing.*
> *Every American is different.*
> *Women weren't free. Limited things they could do.*

*Masztal frequently asks students for elaboration of their responses: "What do you mean by selfish, Nathan?" "What specific lines, Sharina, make you say that Whitman thinks that in America women weren't free?" Students do their best to elaborate, sometimes receiving help from their classmates.*

*Masztal moves the focus of the conversation to certain word choices that Whitman makes in the poem. "The words a poet uses," she points out, "more even than for a novelist, are very carefully chosen. Why do you think that is?"*

*"They don't have as much room for chit chat," a girl answers.*

*"Good, Sarina. That's a good way to put it. Okay, so why does Whitman say he hears America singing?"*

*Hands wave. "Because it's all the sounds of what they do." "Because singing is to express yourself, and everybody's expressing themself in this poem." "It's like, after a while they become their jobs." Masztal responds to her students' responses with praise for their insight, with requests for clarification or elaboration or evidence, and with elaborations and voicings of her own thoughts.*

*When, glancing at her watch, Masztal sees that it's necessary to move on to the next literary work on today's slate, she makes the point that "I Hear America Singing" is an appropriate poem for a place like Turner Tech. "Anybody think they know why I say that? Emilio?"*

*"Because all the kids here are being trained for all different kinds of jobs."*

*"Bingo!"*

*Next, in turn, several students read "I Am an American" aloud. Masztal then reads the following lines over again.*

> *I am of one race and of all races. I am heir to a great estate. I am free and I am bound to a wheel of great responsibility.*

*"What do these lines mean to you?" she asks. As students respond, Masztal writes on the board.*

> *One race and all races*
> *personal races = nationality*
> *all races = America*

*Again, as happens time and again in Masztal's class, a lively discussion ensues. There is some enthusiastic calling out, but mostly students wait until they're called upon. Every voice in the room has spoken at least once today. The students know by now that in Ms. Masztal's class, a big part of English is conversation.*

*"When are we gonna perform, Ms. Masztal?" an eager student asks. But Masztal asks for patience. First the class will briefly attempt to compare and contrast the two works they've been discussing. For a few minutes they talk about similarities and differences in the two works. Ultimately, students decide that both are trying to put "America into words," but that the poem is like a "celebration" and a "song," while the essay has more "detail" and is "more realistic."*

*The final activity for the day, Masztal now announces, will be small-group choral readings of various stanzas of "I Hear America Singing." She explains what she means by choral readings, saying that she'd like to see "really creative" interpretations of the stanzas but doesn't want to say too much about how groups might fashion their performance – "just do the best you can in your groups." Masztal then divides students into four groups, tells them they are to find quiet places either in the classroom or on the grounds nearby, and for the next fifteen minutes to prepare to perform.*

*Fifteen minutes later, having circulated among the groups, mostly encouraging but offering a few suggestions as well, Masztal calls the class back together. She points out that there won't be time for three of the groups to perform today, but those groups will perform right after SSR and journals tomorrow. Then she asks one group to begin. Their performance is wonderful: while three students take turns reading lines from their stanzas, the others mime the actions of sawing wood or nursing a baby, and provide appropriate background sound effects. The final lines are read to the accompaniment of a grandly hummed version of "The Star Spangled Banner." "Bravo," Masztal laughs, as the rest of the students applaud. "I can't wait till tomorrow for more."*

## Introduction

A number of the activities that occurred in the class as described above constitute what many scholars in the field of English/language arts studies consider examples of best, or exemplary, practice. For instance, through the daily, virtually inviolable, scheduling of Sustained Silent Reading, Masztal allows students, whose frequently difficult and sometimes violent home lives mitigate against it, significant time for quiet, concentrated reading. She encourages them to choose their own reading materials (within appropriate limits, of course), based on their own interests, and when they feel helpless to find literature that deals with those interests, she helps them find it. By doing these things, Masztal invites students to participate daily in the world of literacy, and she does so in a non-threatening, respectful fashion. Then, by having the students write thoughtfully and reflectively about what they read, she further invites them into the world of higher literacy, a world where the kinds of thinking and reflecting that writing allow one to do are also given daily practice. In effect, in addition to pleasurable reading, meaningful, personal writing becomes for these students a natural part of their daily lives. Furthermore, Masztal's willingness to engage in ongoing conversation in writing with the students through their journals

demonstrates to them that their words and ideas are respected, and that their voices count.

In Masztal's class, significant time is also dedicated to the study of literature, including, as described above, reading and responding to poetry and essays. In and of itself, there is nothing unusual about this; it is, after all, English class. What makes Masztal and her class' literary endeavors examples of "best practice" is the fact that literature for this teacher and her students is the subject of and opportunity for meaningful conversation, and not, for the most part, monologic lecture. Nystrand (1996) has shown us how rare this kind of sustained and meaningful conversation is in English classes. For her pedagogical purposes, Masztal is less interested (though not uninterested) in what the critics have to say about Whitman than what Sharika and Emilio have to say. She believes the route to a love of literature is through a personal engagement with it. Later perhaps, when the student is ready, the critic will appear. None of this implies, however, that absolutely anything goes in a literature discussion. Masztal is supremely conscientious about asking her students to back up their oral responses and opinions with reasoned explanations and, where appropriate, convincing evidence. Thus, the students are used to being able to support their oral and written assertions, a skill indicative of high literacy, as discussed by Langer (1995), which will enrich their lives in countless ways.

Masztal also creates opportunities for students to make connections between literary works, thereby helping them develop not only a greater sense of the kinds of thematic and other threads that run through literature, but also the more general, but highly literate, skill of finding meaningful connections between things that on the surface do not necessarily appear to be related.

Finally, Masztal recognizes that a classroom is a social community, and in a community everyone can potentially contribute to the learning of everyone else. Thus, Masztal allows students to work in small groups, where they are expected, with some guidance and modeling from the teacher, to construct their own meanings, work cohesively and creatively, and produce meaningful products, such as choral readings of famous poems.

## Background

Significant factors – beyond personality – play a part in the development of exemplary teachers like Masztal. Consider the teachers' past and present experiences within their homes,

neighborhoods, schools, and places of worship. Consider also the people who influence them, both positively and negatively, including parents, siblings, relatives, friends, teachers, mentors, clergy, colleagues, writers, and thinkers, even entertainers. There are the larger contexts, the institutions, in which teachers have studied and worked, and in which they continue to do so. There is, too, the "culture" itself, as well as the various subcultures in which teachers live and participate on a day-to-day basis. Finally, there are the workshops, articles, and forums for idea sharing sponsored by schools, district and state offices, and local and national professional organizations.

If we want to know as much as possible about exemplary teachers – and there are many good reasons why we should – we do ourselves and the profession a disservice if we don't explore as deeply as we can the many factors that contribute to the making of great teachers. Although there will always be an element of the intangible in this endeavor, the more we know about the *many* factors that contribute to the making of exemplary teachers, the more potential power we have to help all teachers develop to the best of their individual abilities. We need to explore and analyze the host of factors that contribute to forming the men and women whom we recognize as exemplary teachers.

Toward that end, this case study describes the living and working macro and micro environments of Janas Masztal, an English/language arts teacher who has been identified by her peers, school administrators, and district supervisors as exemplary. She is known for the amount and quality of her work, respected by her students, seen as innovative in her teaching strategies and methodologies, involved in important educational matters such as curriculum development in her school and district, and committed to lifelong learning. Most importantly, her students are learning and enjoying learning. In 1997, Masztal was recognized by the Florida Council for Exceptional Children as Teacher of the Year.

This case study is part of a larger set of studies, all of which come out of the *Excellence in English* study led by Judith Langer. The goals for the larger study are two-fold: 1) to identify the characteristics of the most effective middle and high school English programs, particularly those whose students are highly successful despite heavy odds; and 2) to outline the features of such programs that contribute to the professional contexts that lead to and support effective teaching. The chief purpose of this case report is to come to understand some of the factors that contribute to Masztal being the exemplary teacher that she is roundly felt to be. This report is based on

many hours of conversation and regular correspondence, formally and informally, with Masztal about her teaching philosophies, influences, and experiences over a two-year period (the 1996-97 and 1997-98 school years). It is also based on observations in her classroom as she works with her students and in professional meetings and in-services. Interviews with administrators, district supervisors, and students also contributed to the findings in this study. The discussion focuses first on the professional contexts within which she works and then returns to English instruction as it is enacted in her classroom.

**Brief Biographical Sketch of Masztal**

Masztal is an English/language arts teacher at William Turner Technical Arts High School in Dade County, Florida. In her early thirties, Masztal is tall and possesses a youthful, athletic appearance. Upon first meeting and chatting with her, one quickly discovers Masztal's wry sense of humor and the depth of her range of interests, which besides teaching – "teaching is my life" – includes the environment, agriculture, literature, and travel. Masztal is not only intelligent, articulate, and fun but also a good, and *sincere*, listener. It seems that Masztal listens so genuinely, because she almost always expects to learn something.

As an undergraduate Masztal was an English major at Florida International University (FIU). "I was an English major because I loved reading." A few years after graduating, she received her certification for teaching from FIU as well. She also holds a masters degree in Reading, which she received from Southeastern University during her early years as a teacher. Masztal has taught all levels of language arts from sixth to twelfth grade.

Masztal readily admits that she was not comfortable with herself as a teacher in her early years in the profession. Her first teaching job was in one of the poorest of the city schools in Dade County. She liked the students but wasn't always happy with some of the conditions there; she stayed for a year and a half. She then taught at the middle school level in Dade County's foreign language magnet school. There, in addition to basic language arts, she taught journalism and creative writing. Masztal felt that the school put too much pressure on the students in that program. It had high expectations of the kids and made things hard but not engaging. "That was a problem for me," she explains.

After three years at this magnet school, frustrated and on the brink of deciding that teaching might not be for her, Masztal came to teach at what was at the time a brand new and somewhat experimental school, Turner Tech, as it is called by faculty and students, where she currently teaches and where she feels happy and "fortunate to be." Unlike her previous school, Turner emphasizes that students learn through experience.

Turner runs on an academy system, and Masztal first taught in the Finance Academy. When the Agriscience Academy became a complete academy, Masztal moved "across the canal" to teach in it (the campus is literally divided by a canal, with the Agriscience Academy occupying one side and the rest of the school occupying the other). The move was voluntary on Masztal's part. She likes agriculture and "the kinds of animal and plant projects" the students in the Agriscience Academy do. The main reasons she moved were because she liked the students themselves ("Before I taught there, I would come over to buy eggs and things and they were always friendly"), because she had previously enjoyed working with a history teacher who was going to be teaching there, and because she was interested, albeit in a general way, in agriculture.

Masztal does not think of herself as an exemplary teacher. In fact she reveals a great deal about herself and one reason why so many people think she *is* exemplary in the following quote: "There's no doubt in my mind that . . . I am nowhere near to being the kind of teacher that I would like to be." Masztal's desire to be a better teacher is palpable. The following two brief anecdotes from the observer's field notes provide insight into the kind of teacher Masztal already is.

> Janas is discussing with me this year's (1997-98) "What Is America?" project and her eyes light up when she says that Cesar came up to her this morning and said, "Look at this book I found on short stories from the Civil War." "I was, like, 'Yes!'"
>
> At the Museum of Science, where a group of selected teachers have been invited by the Dade County language arts department to take a short course in using the Internet as a pedagogical resource, a coffee break is called. [During the break], Janas and fellow Dade County English teacher Kathy Humphrey are engaged in an intense discussion of one of the methods Kathy uses in her classroom and which Janas wants to know all about. "Kathy is a state treasure," Janas says later, "and she should be bottled and given to all the teachers in this county."

These anecdotes exemplify a few essential qualities of Masztal: her genuine enthusiasm for her own teaching and for her students' learning, and her hunger to learn more about how to be a better teacher. Thus, Masztal can be considered as an exemplary teacher always in-the-making.

This report describes Masztal's professional life and activities as a teacher in much greater detail in later sections, but first, in order to give as complete a picture of Masztal's macro environment as possible, it's important to describe the rather unusual institution in which she teaches.

**William Turner Technical Arts ..gh School**

Turner Tech is located in the inner city of Miami, Florida. It is a magnet school operated by the Dade County Public School System and is a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools (see page 12 for more information).

Turner is on á broad, four-lane road a few miles west of Interstate 95. The neighborhoods that surround the school are characterized by mostly contiguous, one story houses with small front and back yards, most with iron security bars covering windows and doors. Some of these houses are well-maintained, others are in various states of disrepair. Old automobiles sit in small driveways or on the streets in front of them. The residents are predominantly African American and Hispanic. Within a few blocks of Turner both east and west are larger boulevards where various commercial enterprises, such as a hairstylist's shop, a mid-sized concrete plant, several fast food restaurants, and a pawn shop are located.

Turner Tech itself is by far the most prominent edifice in the area. Its main building is a large concrete structure painted in warm pastel blues and tans with interspersed sections of thick teal bottle-glass. Lush green grass, palm and other trees, and various tropical shrubbery, all well-groomed, adorn the grounds immediately around the building and the parking lots. One sees virtually no trash or graffiti anywhere on the property.

Unlike many American high schools, the grounds of Turner do not include sprawling football and baseball fields. The school has no official sports teams. Rather, beyond the faculty parking lot and across a pedestrian bridge, which traverses a fairly wide canal that cuts through the school grounds, lies Turner's Agriscience Academy. Here a concrete, tan-colored building smaller than the main building houses the Agriscience Academy's offices and several classrooms. Just beyond the north end of this building are the greenhouses where students in the Agriscience Academy grow and care for flowers, plants, vegetables, and fruits. Also on the grounds of the Agriscience

Academy are four portable classrooms. A hundred or so yards away from the portables are several long, relatively low-ceilinged barns where cattle, goats, and fowl, which the students themselves care for seven days a week, are kept.

Indoors, in the main building, Turner's large lobby/vestibule is cool, spacious, airy, and clean. On the lower level, two large sections of the building are open to the natural sky; here students can sit on benches amid palm trees and other tropical plants, while natural light and fresh air stream in from above. The hallways are generally clean, and except for short intervals between periods, they are also extremely quiet. Students are not permitted to mill about during class periods, and there are ample security staff to ensure that they don't.

One of the first things one notices upon entering the main building is that most (although not all) of the students and many of the faculty wear Turner sport shirts, color-coded according to the academy with which they are affiliated. The students strike the visitor as purposeful, and in generally good spirits. On some of the walls and in cases around the lobby and in the offices one sees displays of student work as well as posters and announcements of upcoming activities.

A security guard sits at a table in front of the main office, which is large and brightly lit. Behind a long counter, eight or so staff work at desks interspersed throughout the room. Trophies, plaques, and other commendations having to do with the school's non-sports related accomplishments adorn the walls and a display case.

**The History, Programs, and Mission of Turner Tech**

Turner Tech is four years old and describes itself as a "bold new departure from the traditional American high school" (from the "William Turner Technical Arts High School Mission Statement"). It serves 1,947 ninth- through twelfth- grade students from around Dade County, many of whom travel as much as one and a half hours to attend. Over two-thirds of the student population is African American, almost one-third is Hispanic, and the remainder Caucasian and Asian. Almost half (48%) of the students receive free/reduced lunches.

For more than 30 years the site of the current school housed the Dade County High School for Agriculture, the predecessor to Turner's Agriscience Academy. The current school is wired with state-of-the-art technology, including a television production facility from which students produce

daily broadcasts of school announcements and activities. Turner has integrated academic, technical, and graduate standards, unique among Dade County schools. Four years of recruiting efforts have resulted in the school's receiving nearly twice as many applicants as it can admit.

Turner offers what it calls a "two for one" diploma, whereby students can earn a traditional diploma that qualifies them for entrance into two or four year colleges while simultaneously earning state-certified career training.

The curriculum at Turner is an integrated one in which students and teachers are assigned to one of seven academies: Agriscience; Applied Business Technology; NAF Fanny Mae Academy of Finance; Health; Industrial Technology; Public Service/Television Production; and Residential Construction. Students select a career academy when they enter the school. Within each academy, teachers from various disciplines work in teams to develop integrated theme units, which apply "core learning competencies in their respective academic disciplines within the context of the students' selected career major" (Turner Tech Case History pamphlet). By fulfilling the requirements of a sequence of core and elective courses, students gain certification in one or more related fields.

All Turner students participate in a variety of hands-on experiences in workplaces as well as with school-based enterprises. Turner enjoys partnerships with many businesses that play an active role in the education of its students. "In their junior and senior years, students can participate in extensive internships and apprenticeships and may receive credit toward graduation from supervised work-based learning experiences, where employers provide detailed evaluations of students' on-the-job performance" (Case History [see above]). In-school enterprises are run by the students themselves. For example, in the Agriscience Academy students raise livestock and horticultural stock, and they market them through public sales and auctions.

The essential mission of the Turner curriculum, quoted from its official mission statement is to "develop information-literacy and 'lifetime' learning skills among all students" and to "provide students with a high school education that will enable them to enter the world of work with the skills and confidence that will enable them to be informed, effective, and productive citizens of the 21st century."

**Masztal's Agriscience Academy Classroom and Students**

Masztal meets her classes in a portable classroom "across the canal." Because of the need for air-conditioning in south Florida classrooms, the portables have few windows. The lighting, however, is sufficient to keep the room from feeling gloomy, and Masztal has done much by way of displaying student work and other materials to brighten the room.

Desks are arranged in the traditional rank-and-file fashion, although students are frequently asked to rearrange them for small group work. Masztal has a computer on her desk, which she uses, among other things, to keep attendance records and to record grades. Her desk is often somewhat disordered, with papers, books, files, and other materials scattered about. There are several bookshelves placed around the perimeters of the room, all crammed with books from Shakespeare to young adult titles like *Clover* and *A Day No Pigs Would Die*. At various times over the semesters, different displays have adorned the four walls, the blackboards and the tops of cabinets and bookshelves; for example, there have been "farm scene" displays based on scenes from the novel *Clover* and butterfly art displays based on the novel *California Blue*.

Masztal describes the students in her class as "really mixed." Although the class is "mixed" in terms of gender and ethnic origin (about 50% African American, 45% Hispanic, and the remaining 5% Asian and Caucasian), Masztal was mainly referring to her students' wide range of academic abilities. "I've got kids who read on the fourth grade level – special ed kids – and others who read on the college level. It's quite heterogeneous." The school provides Masztal with an aide – "Ms. J" – to help the slower students. About her students Masztal says, "They're *all* really good kids. And given some of the neighborhoods these kids come out of, it's really amazing how good they are." She cites, for example, Cesar Torres, a thoughtful, sensitive writer who lives on a street full of gang members.

Interviews with several key students, including Cesar, attest that overall, these students feel Masztal is a great or good teacher for three reasons: she really cares about them; they have learned a lot, especially about how to "communicate"; and she makes English fun and relevant. The students particularly like doing projects. They also, to a person, love being in the Agriscience Academy. They enjoy working with animals, plants, and vegetables, and they feel they are being well prepared for jobs and a future in the "real world." Student perspectives on issues such as

Masztal as a teacher and English/language arts and its value in their lives are discussed in several other places in this report.

## Larger Contexts: Masztal's Professional World

The following sections describe Masztal's professional contexts, including the following: the district, school, and academy in which she works; the colleagues, administrators, and district personnel with whom she works; the various organizations to which she belongs and with which she interacts; and the professional activities in which she engages. To various degrees, all of these exert an influence on who Masztal is and what she does as an ever-in-the-making exemplary professional educator.

### Masztal and Turner's Agriscience Academy

Turner is, in many ways, an unusual school, and thus, working there is bound to have effects on its teachers. Several features distinguish Turner from the vast majority of high schools in the United States, including, for example: that it belongs to the Coalition of Essential Schools; that it employs an academy structure; that its students wear uniforms; and that it has important, working relationships with the larger business and civic community. Although none of these features is unique among American high schools, each of them is rare.

One particularly important and salient feature of Turner, and one that has a direct and immediate impact on its teachers, is the school's academy structure. Philosophically, the academy structure is based on the Coalition of Essential Schools' tenet that in the realm of education, smaller is better than larger. From that perspective, the concept of schools-within-a-school makes sound pedagogical sense. Of course, not all Coalition schools are structured by distinct academies, especially by such a fairly broad vocation-related range of them as exists at Turner, and not all schools are fortunate enough to have resources like a television studio, a series of green houses and stables, and a fully wired school. In many ways, faculty and students at Turner are quite privileged.

But having access to these features does not guarantee that any individual teacher will be exemplary, nor even necessarily good. However, given that the purpose of this report is to describe and analyze the macro as well as micro contexts of one already identified exemplary teacher in order to show how factors like environment and social contexts have and continue to contribute to her standing as well as ongoing development as an exemplary teacher, and also to demonstrate and analyze how these influences become enacted in the classroom, it is important to consider the contribution that the school structure itself makes not only to Masztal's approach to teaching but also to her motivation to continue to grow and change as a professional educator.

It is important to note here, however, that like any other school, Turner has its share of problems. Even institutions that are based on sound educational theory, and even those that solicit and often receive significant funding, do not always pan out in reality as cleanly and smoothly as theory might suggest. As will be discussed throughout this paper, even a school like Turner has problems. From the offices of the administrators to the individual classrooms, tradeoffs must be made.

For the most part, Masztal concurs with the tenets of the Coalition of Essential Schools. She feels, for example, that "the school-within-a-school idea makes kids succeed," because it allows teachers to get to know all the students in a particular academy in a way that wouldn't be possible otherwise. "We're like a family out here," she says. "We all watch out for each other. And the students know that." Watching Masztal teach, walking around the campus with her, and watching her interact with former students, one sees that she does indeed know, and warmly, virtually every student in the Agriscience Academy.

The school-within-a-school concept also promotes pride in a given academy. Masztal is active in her students' non-English/language arts agricultural activities, for example traveling with them to fairs, shows, and contests. She often talks about Agriscience Academy activities like agriculture fairs and contests, exhorting her students by saying things such as, "Come on, guys. We want to look good at the county fair, right? We want to look like we know what we're doing. We want to look like professionals." Students often discuss their animals and plants with her and with each other, speaking with pride, concern, and a sense of expertise about agricultural matters. "They know so much," Masztal says. "You see a hundred pound sophomore leading a two-thousand pound steer around the grounds and you think, wow!" Students come to the Agriscience grounds on Saturdays, Sundays, holidays, and over the summer in order to feed and care for their

animals and plants – and do so willingly. They seem deeply committed to the academy and feel themselves a real part of the community. One reason for their positive feelings is that they believe very sincerely that the academy is training them for future jobs in agriculture or agriscience. Says Cesar, "This place is helping meet my dream . . . to be a vet."

Masztal clearly enjoys teaching in the Agriscience Academy. In addition to the fact that she likes the kind of students who are drawn to agriscience and to the fact that she is interested in agriculture and in the kinds of projects agriscience students become involved in, she also likes the fact that the Agriscience Academy is physically separate from the main building. She says that "out here across the canal" she feels a certain independence, a certain sense of being removed from some of the more frustrating political and social activity in the main building. She is able to focus better on her students and their needs and on the work and projects they are all doing together. Indeed, based on observations of a teacher in the Fanny Mae Business Academy, which is housed in the main building, it seems that teachers in Agriscience do have, if not in *fact* then at least in *sense*, more independence, more "space," than other teachers at Turner.

But Masztal is by no means seeking complete independence. In fact one of the main reasons she likes teaching in the Agriscience Academy is that, until very recently, she was able to work with a man she calls "her hero," history teacher Pete Bermudez.

**Masztal's Professional Relationship and Collaborations with Pete Bermudez**

Pete Bermudez is the history teacher in the Agriscience Academy.[2] He is the person whom Masztal claims has had the most influence on her professional development at Turner. Together, sometimes along with other faculty, sometimes not, they have been collaborators on several student projects, some of which never quite found full fruition, and others which were quite successful. One of the successful projects was a literature fair, the idea for which came from one of their frequent brainstorming sessions. All the Agriscience students, most of whom have Masztal and Bermudez as their English and History teachers (there are occasionally students who, for one reason or another, have one but not the other teacher) made projects based on historical and literary works they'd been studying, and also wrote stories themselves related to these works.

Other teachers were recruited as judges, and there were displays and awards. Additional collaborative projects involving Bermudez and Masztal are described in subsequent sections.

Bermudez sports thick dark hair and a dark beard, both of which are streaked with grey. He is about 40 and, like Masztal, is an exemplary educator. He converses in a paradoxically gentle yet intense manner and his leadership qualities are palpable. By both faculty and administrators, he is generally felt to be a force at Turner. Not only is he knowledgeable – like Masztal, he is always keen to know more. A multimedia presentation he gave to his Critical Friends Group (a group of peers that meets to give feedback to each other) was impressive not only for its technical design, which showed great creativity and expertise, but also for the quality of thought it exhibited. Essentially, the presentation, which Bermudez was planning to give at a national meeting of representatives from various Coalition of Essential Schools, was about how Turner is continually incorporating technology in its quest for educational excellence.

While Masztal views Bermudez as her "hero," Bermudez insists that their's is a mutual admiration. Being the kind of intense, "can- and will-do" person he is, Bermudez enjoys working with a like-minded individual who is not satisfied with making big plans and then letting them fade away in the haze of day-to-day business, as sometimes happens at a school like Turner, which is philosophically oriented toward the concept of projects – sometimes quite elaborate projects – but which still hasn't found foolproof ways of bringing them all to satisfactory conclusions. In fact, it was frustration over the inability to get their 1996-97 academy-wide project completed as planned that caused Masztal and Bermudez to decide that in 1997-98 they would do a project together that, "come what may was going to get done." They call that interdisciplinary project "What Is America?"

**The "What Is America?" Project** centers around students finding answers to an "essential" question: "What is America?" The basic premise of the project is that through class discussion, individual and group research, the writing of articles and putting together of group newspapers, the reading of selected literature and then the writing of book reviews, as well as the more general study of historical, literary, and journalistic works, students will come to discover and deepen their own concepts of what America is, and perhaps what it isn't. Masztal and Bermudez designed the project so that parts of it were accountable primarily to the discipline of English/language arts, others to history, and still others to both. The assessment of student work for the project occurs on various levels, some ongoing and some of a culminating nature.

Since, for the most part, Masztal and Bermudez have the same Agriscience students, they are able to conduct this multidisciplinary project without having to manipulate either their own or their students' schedules. Masztal meets the students in the morning from 7:30 to 9:20, and then, after home room, the students go to Bermudez's class until around noon. Although the overall project was designed a week or so before school started in September, at which time benchmark dates for certain major assessments, assignments, and other components of the project were set, still others of the details are worked out on an ongoing, day-by-day basis. For example, Masztal said that on some mornings, as soon as her class ends, she runs over to Bermudez's class during home room and tells him what they did so that he can "piggy back" on it.

Components of the project include the following: 1) the formation of small groups, with members writing individual newspaper articles about historical events, such as the Lincoln-Douglas debates and the writing of the Emancipation Proclamation in present tense, as if students themselves were eye witnesses to these events, and then, as a group, compiling these into a published newspaper; 2) book reports on literary works from the 19th and 20th centuries; 3) a speech, both written and delivered orally, which answers the question, "What is America?"; and 4) a culminating seminar in which students display and discuss written and other materials they have created in pursuit of their individual answers to the project's essential question.

Students interviewed for this study felt that the "What Is America?" project was interesting and educationally worthwhile. James, for example, likes the fact that the project is interdisciplinary. "We're not just learning different things, we're all collaborating different subjects into that one subject. So we're really learning one whole thing." Frank agrees that interdisciplinary projects "make sense. Because of the fact that history is literature, and it's all written down, and to be able to understand writing and stuff, you have to know history. And the way they've combined it is a real easy way to learn, as far as both teachers working on similar things." Josephina likes the fact that having two teachers doing the same project means the student has a better chance of really learning something. "They help you a lot. When you don't understand either one part or the other they help you, like the writing part Ms. Masztal and the find-the-information-part Mr. B."

**Masztal's Relationship with Her Agriscience Academy Team**

All teachers at Turner are a part of a team that is composed of teachers from each of the disciplines in each of the academies. Although certain specialists may be members of only one academy, there are teachers from the primary subjects such as English, history, math, and science in each of the academies. Teams meet on a fairly regular basis, primarily to discuss the progress of students in the academy and to devise and refine plans for academy-wide projects.

During one observed team meeting, Masztal was seen to be an active participant in idea-generation as well as a volunteer ready to do what was needed to make plans become realities. The focus of the meeting was a project that the Agriscience Academy students would participate in first within the academy and then, if things went well, in a county-wide contest. During the meeting Masztal not only contributed several ideas about how the project could be structured, she also volunteered to both help all the students with the written component of the project as well as to be a judge for that component.

Most members of the Agriscience team appeared to work fairly well together; they were congenial and involved, and they displayed a sense of humor in their interactions. However, several of the members of the team were in more or less constant disagreement about many of the issues under discussion, and Masztal mentioned afterwards that three of the men "don't get along." More importantly, Masztal also said several months after this meeting that the project discussed at the meeting never really came about in the way it was supposed to, which she found very discouraging. She said that at the team level, many good ideas are discussed but unfortunately are often not followed through. She added, though, that she and individual members of the team have worked collaboratively together on projects, on curriculum matters, and on extracurricular agricultural activities that have been rewarding and successful. For example, Masztal has worked collaboratively with the animal science teacher. While he did his unit on insects, Masztal had her students read the book *California Blue* and then create butterfly gardens.

Though the idea of interdisciplinary teams is a pedagogically sound one, the reality is that it is, according to Masztal – and observations of the Agriscience Academy team bear this out – difficult to make large-scale interdisciplinary projects work. This then becomes an impediment to good teachers like Masztal who don't want to spend time making plans that are not likely to be carried out. Masztal wants to use the one planning period that she has (and all Turner teachers

have) each day to the best advantage. Masztal would much prefer to work in smaller groups on more manageable and do-able projects, such as the "What Is America?" project with Bermudez or the insect project with the animal science teacher.

**Masztal and the English Department**

One drawback to the academy system as it is run at Turner is that while teams and/or Critical Friends Groups (CFG) meet fairly frequently, disciplinary departments do not. Masztal herself chairs the English department at Turner, but the job is "mostly clerical," in which she distributes and accounts for books and oversees the department budget. Teachers in the English department meet only about once a month. When Masztal was asked if the lack of time allocated by the school for departments to meet is a problem, she immediately replied, "Absolutely." Team and CFG meetings are the places where Masztal and her faculty mates are provided time to exchange ideas on a more regular basis, but at Turner, the kinds of conversations that can bring discipline-specific benefits to teachers are traded-off for more interdisciplinary concerns.

**Masztal and Her Critical Friends Group**

The purpose of a Critical Friends Group is for teachers and other educators to be able to discuss and share general and specific ideas and issues around their own teaching and administrating and to get feedback on these ideas and issues. Ideally, these groups function much the way some writers groups function, with members offering sympathetic ears, critical feedback (questions, suggestions, alternatives), and encouragement to one another.

In 1996-97, Masztal's Agriscience Academy team was also her CFG. In 1997-98, that is not the case. Masztal has joined a CFG comprised of about 12 members from different disciplines and from various academies.

In an observed meeting of Masztal's new CFG, the first part of the meeting was dedicated to clarifying how they could structure their small-group feedback sessions so that these sessions could be most helpful to each member. The overall heading for such meetings is "Consultancy."

the basic ideas for which were developed as part of the Coalition of Essential Schools' National Re: Learning Faculty Program, and which was further adapted and revised as part of the work of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform's National School Reform Faculty Project.

At the meeting, it was suggested that a certain amount of time be allotted in the consultancy to the presenter to present his/her problem or issue; a certain amount to the other members to ask probing questions; a certain amount to the group, but not the presenter, for discussion of the issue at hand; and a certain amount for the presenter to say or ask whatever else might be needed. After a brief skit in which three of the members tried to enact what a good session might look like, the larger group broke into smaller ones for actual consultancies around members' various pedagogical and other issues.

In Masztal's consultancy group, Masztal, somewhat typically, agreed to go first. If no one else was going to get the full benefit of this feedback meeting, *she* certainly was. She told the group that as a midterm assessment for her "What Is America?" project she was asking her students to write and deliver a speech based on their current sense of the answer to that central question. She gave many details of the project and of the assignment. Essentially what she was asking of the group was whether or not they thought she had structured the assignment in the most pedagogically sound way possible. In fact, the questions and discussion that followed Masztal's presentation of the issue greatly complicated matters for Masztal, because the three members of the group did not simply engage in small talk about the project, but truly pushed Masztal to articulate to the greatest extent possible why she was giving the assignment in the form she was giving it, what outcome she hoped to achieve, why she chose to emphasize one aspect over another, and what she meant by certain terms. At one point Masztal wiped her brow and said, "Wow, you guys are really making me think hard here." Indeed, they were.

When Masztal's time was up, the group went on to help a math teacher come up with some ways of helping her students write math-related essays. Masztal was a big part of that conversation, offering insights about the writing process, about how to build transitions into essays, as well as about other aspects of effective essay writing. She also promised to send over to the math teacher some materials she had in her office on the subject of writing across the disciplines. After the meeting, Masztal told me she found her own consultancy, although disconcerting at times, on the whole "a great thing, a great help." She said she was now clearer

about just what she was asking of her students, and had several good ideas about how she'd do things differently the next time around.

In comparing the two different CFGs that Masztal has been a part of, she has a greater enthusiasm for her most recent one. It is carefully and thoughtfully structured, and the level of intensity, as well as the level of palpable caring by members for one another, is quite high. It is difficult to imagine any teacher who has the benefit of his/her colleagues' attention under sensible guidelines for conducting consultancies to come away from them without at least something that will improve his/her teaching. This is especially true of Masztal, who is not defensive, and is always on the alert for good new ideas and for ways to change.

Clearly, Masztal's CFG is an important part of her experience as a Turner faculty member. The CFG is both intellectually stimulating and genuinely purposeful and helpful. It provides a sorely needed and strongly desired opportunity for intercollegiality and the discussion of educational ideas.

**Masztal's Relationship with the Dade County Language Arts Department**

A major source of ideas for what and how Masztal teaches English/language arts is the Dade County District Office's Division of Language Arts and Reading, overseen by Norma Bossard and supervised by Sallie Snyder. Snyder, in particular, is cited again and again by Masztal as well as many of the other exemplary teachers in the Excellence in English study as a dynamic person who is always on the lookout for new and creative ideas about effective teaching methods, pedagogies, and curriculum. According to Masztal, "With Sallie and the people downtown, it's just 'Ask and You Shall Receive.'"

**A Description of Sallie Snyder**

Snyder claims she's only a few years away from retiring. Her energy and enthusiasm for her job, however, betray any sense of someone winding down. She makes a point of getting to know the teachers in her district. In many cases, through years of professional contact and personal conversation, she knows what teachers' particular interests are. For example, she will sometimes

discover an idea that she knows a certain teacher or group of teachers might be interested in and will call the teachers about it. She'd done this for Masztal several times. "It's knowing that match," Snyder told me. "It's knowing who would want something and trying to follow through on it."

The ideas that Snyder brings to her district's teachers can come from any number of sources, including individual teachers, professional journals, conferences and conventions – "even something like 'Notes Plus' [NCTE's Newsletter of Practical Teaching Ideas for the Secondary Classroom], I was looking at 'Notes Plus' the other day and I saw a fabulous vocabulary activity. I also saw [a piece on] literature circles that I passed on to [several Dade County teachers]."

In discussing the sources of good ideas, Snyder relates a story about a first-year teacher who is praised by her principal for doing a great job, especially given that she's a brand new teacher. The teacher confesses to the principal that the ideas aren't hers: she goes next door or down the hall and "steals" them. The principal says, yes, but what makes you a good teacher is that you know which ideas to steal. Snyder commented, "I think if I have one strength . . . it's that I know which ideas to steal when I go to a conference, or a convention, and I know which ones will work, and I am reasonably good at translating them, because sometimes you hear something that isn't quite on point, but you know you could make it on point."

Having found, or "stolen," ideas she believes in, Snyder and her district partners spend a significant amount of time "trying them out, examining them, and evaluating them." She says, "Some of the curriculum we've been developing is in its third, fourth incarnation, and only now are we saying, this is really the way we want it to be. It doesn't always happen the first time."

When an idea is ready for dissemination, Snyder will arrange workshops or other opportunities for district teachers in order for them to learn about it. "We give thousands of hours of workshops," she says. Snyder and other members of the English/language arts supervisory team often run these workshops themselves, which partly explains why virtually all the English/language arts teachers in Dade County know them personally. (This is by no means the typical distant, even ominous "downtown" that many English teachers in large school districts are familiar with.) "We like to spend more of our time out of the office than in the office."

But Snyder and company do not try to do it all by themselves. She and the other district supervisors frequently invite exemplary teachers to come downtown and actually help write curriculum, with the district picking up the tab to provide substitutes for the teachers. These

teachers, who are or become particularly conversant with a new method, pedagogy, or curriculum, will sometimes be asked to give a workshop or presentation about it either to the teachers of their own schools, to other schools, or to congregated groups of teachers from around the district.

Of course, providing new curriculum or giving workshops that demonstrate new methodologies and pedagogies in and of themselves do not guarantee success in classrooms. For one thing, there is an issue of "translation." Snyder admits being surprised sometimes by the way an idea she has presented to teachers has been misinterpreted by some of them. "You'll hear them and you'll think, my God, that's what they thought from what I said? How could I have been so unclear in what I was saying that they could translate it this way?" This issue, Snyder believes, points to one difference between ordinary and extraordinary teachers. Extraordinary teachers seem to understand the concept, and if they don't, they will make sure they do before the day is done.

Furthermore, extraordinary teachers know how "to adapt [an idea] to suit themselves, which is part of the power of effective teaching. It's not just taking it verbatim, but making it better." This is one of the qualities Snyder sees as prominent in Masztal.

Another important source of ideas for Snyder is her "own head." These kinds of ideas, she says, often arise "out of a need."

> You have a need, and there is a problem, and you want to solve it, and you look at resources if there are any. But when it's something like the Florida Writing Assessment Test, for which there were not resources when we started out, then it comes from: how do we solve this problem? How do we take this test and analyze it and develop the support that we need to give teachers and kids to solve their problems? So it is truly a problem-solving process.

As one will note, some of the same qualities that Snyder admires in good teachers – the ability to know which ideas to "steal," the ability to "translate" ideas so that they make sense when one implements them, and the ability to take ideas and "make them better" by tailoring them to fit a specific situation – are qualities that she herself possesses.

The following section provides an example of how work in Snyder's office becomes pedagogy in Masztal's classroom. It involves the Florida Writes! exam, which all Florida public school students have to take in fourth, eighth, and tenth grades. Snyder believes the test is an essentially good and worthwhile one for two reasons. First, she feels it emphasizes to students the importance of writing in their education. Second, it is evaluated using a rubric that makes clear

the criteria for a high score and that emphasizes elements of writing that she agrees are important. The challenge for Snyder and her office was to find a way to help teachers in grades four, eight, and ten prepare students to succeed on this test. One of the first things they realized, she says, was that "kids don't read the question." So they focused on how the questions were crafted, in order to transmit information about the questions to teachers so that teachers could teach students how to focus on and understand what they were being asked by the prompt.

Snyder explained in some detail how she and her office mates analyzed the scoring rubric provided by the state, deconstructing it, in a sense, with the aim of knowing as deeply as possible what the elements of a high score were, so that this information, too, could be transmitted to teachers. "What we realized we had to do was translate this into teacher language, in a way that it could translate into kid language." Essentially, she said, "we cracked the code of how to teach these kids how to take this test, and we've done that for [grades] four, eight, and ten." The following section demonstrates Masztal using the information from downtown to prepare her tenth graders for the Florida Writes! exam.

**An Observation of Masztal Preparing Her Tenth Graders for the Florida Writes! Exam**

One morning early in the spring term of 1997, Masztal was observed preparing her tenth grade students for the Florida Writes! exam. The two sessions observed were not the very first preparatory classes Masztal had given these students for the test. Also, most of them had taken the Florida Writes! exam as eighth graders. The purpose here is not to fully describe Masztal's class per se, but to show how Snyder and the people downtown helped Masztal to prepare her students for this test. (The observations below, derived from field notes, are written in present tense.)

The first thing Masztal reminds the students is that the test may ask for either an expository or a persuasive essay, and they will not know which until the test is actually in front of them. Masztal then asks the students what "expository" writing is. "When you *explain* something," a young man answers. "Good," Masztal remarks. "*Exp*ository," she annunciates with a certain amount of exaggeration, "*exp*lains." She then asks what persuasive writing is. A young woman answers, "When you convince someone about something." "Right," Masztal says.

Masztal directs the class' attention to the front blackboard, where the following practice question is written:

> Everyone has had a school year that is better than others. Think about the best school year you ever had. Now, write to explain to your audience why this particular school year was your best school year ever.

Masztal reminds the students to look to the last sentence of the question for their instructions. "Now, circle the instructions that specifically tell you what to do." She then asks the students what they are being asked to do in this question, and a young woman says, "Explain." "Exactly," Masztal says. "Remember: X in explain, X in expository."

The students have been taught that this test asks for a five-paragraph essay; therefore, Masztal elicits, "How many examples will you need?" Students call out, "Three." Masztal relates a story to them of a student she taught last year who "got carried away" and gave five examples. She reiterates that they must only answer what the question asks.

Masztal and her class spend a significant amount of time brainstorming possible ways of writing about this prompt, with many different students volunteering possibilities for what factors may have made a certain school year the "best." When the class together has decided upon ninth grade as the best year and, after some hashing, has agreed upon three reasons for it, Masztal asks them all to write an introductory paragraph using the agreed-upon year and reasons. As the students write, Masztal says, "I'm going to do one, too," and does. When she finishes writing a short time later, she circulates among the students, talking with individuals about what they've written so far. Reminding the students that they will continue with this tomorrow, Masztal moves on to a lesson on another topic.

In the next session, Masztal breaks the class into two groups of twelve or so, and asks the students to read their introductory paragraphs to each other and to comment on them. The students tend to make very general comments ("It was good because it showed Frank's personality"), and so Masztal models the type of discussion questions she wants to promote, asking student-listeners as well as the writer things like, "How did he do?" or "Frank, did you use a transition? Where?"

It is clear to the observer that Masztal is very aware of the scoring rubric and is trying to make the students conscious of what the readers of the test will be looking for in the essays. The message seems to be getting across. For example, when a number of students comment only very generally that they like the paragraph of a particular student, another says, "Kids liked it, but kids aren't going to be reading the test." Masztal immediately agrees and adds that the students have

to be very aware of their audience – in this case, a "bunch of English teachers."

The relationship between the work Sallie Snyder and the people downtown did on the preparation for teaching the Florida Writes! exam and the way Masztal prepared her students for the test is fairly clear and fairly direct: We see Masztal focusing her students on determining the genre of the prompt (with the aid of mnemonic devices) and then on making sure they understand what they are being asked. In their writing she dwells upon their sense of audience awareness and on remaining conscious throughout the paper of what the audience is looking for. The first case, i.e., reading the question carefully, is of course the very point Snyder and company had determined was the major problem students had with these kinds of standardized tests. The second case, i.e.. being aware of the audience and what it wants from the paper, relates to Snyder and company's analysis and subsequent emphasis to teachers of the test's scoring rubric. Thus, a fairly direct relationship can be established here between the work done downtown and the work done in an actual classroom.

Sallie Snyder and the people "downtown" have directly and indirectly helped Masztal become a better, more informed, more involved teacher, as Masztal readily and enthusiastically admits. Snyder and colleagues provide teachers with workshops on all kinds of ideas, for which they are always on the lookout and for which the sources are many and varied, from conferences to 'Notes Plus.' Because Snyder knows the teachers of her district well, she not only provides more or less global information to the entire corpus of language arts teachers in the district, but she is also able to pass along information of interest to specific individual teachers or teams of teachers. Furthermore, three of the exemplary teachers in the larger study of which this report is one part have been asked by Snyder to work on district-wide programs such as curriculum formation – an activity that the teachers have found to be rewarding not only because they have been privileged to contribute, but because doing this kind of work has exposed them to the ideas of other teachers.

### Masztal's Professional Affiliations

Masztal is a member of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Dade County Council of Teachers of English (DCCTE), and the International Reading Association. She regularly reads the *English Journal*, and has on occasion found ideas in it which she has tried in her classroom, usually tailoring the basic idea to fit the particular needs of her students.

While she has never attended an NCTE national convention ("I'd love to, though.") Masztal does attend DCCTE meetings regularly. At these meetings, sometimes over meals, members listen to guest speakers (recent ones include Professors Eliot Engle and Judith Langer), plan activities such as the annual Dade County Literature Fair, and socialize with one another. At one such meeting observed, Masztal took copious notes as the guest speaker spoke, and afterwards talked with colleagues from other schools about both pedagogical and more personal issues. At this meeting, as in most environments in which she has been observed, Masztal displayed perhaps the most salient essential quality that makes her an exemplary teacher: an endless desire to know more about being a good teacher.

Masztal expressed a sense of ever-growing professionalism at being a regular participant at these kinds of functions. She not only "learns what its like to be a professional among professionals," but, in addition, ideas that she first encountered at DCCTE meetings, or ideas she'd heard of but which were clarified at these meetings, have made their way into her classroom. Examples include using semantic webs and think-aloud writings.

## What Counts as English in Masztal's Classroom

In any classroom, teachers must make crucial decisions about how to use their limited and hence valuable time in order to maximally enhance student learning. Invariably, decisions about how classroom time is spent involve tradeoffs: every moment spent engaged in one activity is a moment spent *not* engaged in another. Unless every pedagogical decision is made by a higher-up in a school – an unlikely scenario – it is probable that in looking at the ways a given English teacher uses class time, we are seeing, to a significant extent, a reflection of what counts as English in that classroom to that teacher under a specific set of circumstances. That is, in any

English classroom, what counts as English is a combination of, among other less tangible things, what matters about English to the teacher, what the student body is like and what its needs are, what the school is like, what the department is like, and what the administration is like.

Given the previously described conditions and mandate at Turner as well as the description of Masztal herself and the variety of people and things that have influenced her in her professional development, there is no one single term to describe what counts as English in Masztal's classroom. There are, to be sure, some things that count more than others. Among the elements that count most as English are the following: time given over for silent reading; the demonstration of knowledge; the fostering of meaningful conversation in small and large groups; theme projects (often of several weeks or months duration) and the relationship of reading, writing, and speaking to other disciplines; and the development of written and oral communication skills, including the writing of five-paragraph essays, especially in preparation for the all-important Florida Writes! exam.

Based on observations, what does *not* count as highly as the aforementioned elements in Masztal's classroom are some of the more traditional components of the discipline of English. These include the formal study of vocabulary and grammar, the study of classic literary works, and the learning of literary terminology and methods of literary analysis. Creative writing is de-emphasized in favor of other kinds of writing, including the traditional five-paragraph essay and technical writing and journalistic articles on literary-historical topics.

The relatively little time Masztal spends on some of the more traditional components of English represents a tradeoff she makes. Perhaps because of the vocational nature of the school itself and of her perception of her students' needs, Masztal's focus in English tends toward the practical over the aesthetic, the craft over the art. To some extent, English is enacted more as a means to a successful career than as, say, a cultural enhancement to a developing personality, although that is not to say that the latter does not occur. To borrow an old metaphor, in Masztal's class the "bread" of English is more important than the "roses."

In order to provide a broad yet detailed picture, some of the prominent components of English in Masztal's classroom are described below.

**Silent Reading**. Masztal devotes the first fifteen minutes of every class to silent reading. She knows that some people criticize using class time for reading, but she believes, given the wide

range of reading abilities in the class (with many students below average), the reality that many students have not been readers in the past and therefore do not like to read, and, finally, the fact that many students in the Agriscience Academy spend a good deal of after school time working with their livestock and plants, that dedicating a portion of class time to silent reading makes sound pedagogical sense. Students in her classes do spend the given time actually reading. In fact, they come to class and, almost to a student, immediately open their books and begin reading their novels, stories, magazines, or newspapers. If they are not doing enough reading at home, they are certainly reading for at least those fifteen minutes. Students interviewed believe that the reading time is valuable and would not like to lose it. Josephina, for example, said that the reading time in school is responsible for her learning to enjoy reading, which "I didn't used to like to do." Charlene said because of the reading time in school she now not only reads her books in class but reads them "at home, too."

**Demonstrating Knowledge.** One of the tenets of Essential School philosophy is that students should be able to demonstrate or exhibit what they know, rather than simply pass culminating tests. Students in Masztal's classes are frequently involved in situations where they present their work before others, including their peers, Masztal herself, and other teachers who are brought in to act as judges or assessors; such was the case for the literary fair as well as for the midterm speech based on the "What Is America?" project.

**Interdisciplinarity.** As shown already, English, like all the academic subjects, is seen in Turner in general (following the tenets of Essential School philosophy) and in Masztal's class in particular, as a component of a larger interdisciplinary whole. Thus projects, which constitute the main mode of activity and driving force behind pedagogy at Turner, are almost always interdisciplinary in nature. The "What Is America?" project and the insect unit are examples.

**Classroom Conversation.** Masztal rarely lectures in the formal sense of the word. Her classes are, essentially, conversations between teacher and students and between students and students. In addition to conversations around literary works such as *A Day No Pigs Would Die* and "I Hear America Singing," Masztal engages the whole class in conversation to elicit ideas from students about, for example, approaches to writing a Florida Writes! exam essay and finding sources to help answer the question "What Is America?" Generally, by calling on a wide range of students, some who are volunteering and others who aren't, Masztal is able to keep the

majority of students engaged during these conversations. In fact, the number of hands raised to answer a given question or make a point is usually a substantial percentage of the class.

Masztal is aware that the kind of question one asks has a real impact on the kind of response one receives. She tries to fashion questions that promote student thinking. For example, she tends to ask questions that cannot be answered in a single word or phrase, but rather require some thinking and explanation. She frequently asks follow-up questions.

On a regular basis, Masztal breaks the class into small groups for conversation and cooperative work. She believes that small group work allows more students to voice their feelings, opinions, and knowledge and promotes the development of oral and written communication skills. She is particularly impressed by the fact that the stronger students tend to be very polite and caring when working with the weaker ones in small groups. For example, during a class session that was observed for this study when Masztal was launching the "What Is America?" project, wanting students to understand the concept of perspective, she had the students break into groups and asked them to come up with ideas about potential perspectives people might have about different issues such as interracial dating, rap music, and school uniforms. The group observed stayed on topic for a full fifteen minutes, listening to one another, sharing ideas, respectfully disagreeing, and in general communicating and brainstorming effectively. The final part of that class consisted of several of the small groups reporting to the entire class what they had come up with.

**Written and Oral Communication Skills.** Because Turner is a vocational school, Masztal believes it is particularly important that her students learn to be effective communicators in a practical sense; that is, in the "real world" they will need to communicate effectively with prospective employers and coworkers. With regard to writing, for example, Masztal has her students do a significant amount of technical writing, resume writing, and business letter writing but relatively little "creative" writing such as poetry and fiction writing. During the classroom observations on which this report is based, she has not taught formal vocabulary or grammar, but has focused on certain grammatical issues on written student work. Masztal admits to a bit of uncertainty as to how much vocabulary and grammar to teach her students. She says she will choose grammatical concepts to focus on once in a while, but mostly picks and chooses, on the fly, what will be covered in those areas.

In class discussions Masztal will sometimes ask students to rephrase what they have said, making a comment such as, "Is that the way you'd say it in a job interview?" Based on interviews with students, it seems that Masztal has succeeded in making her students conscious of how important the way they speak is in the "real world." For most of them, the ability to communicate and "English" are synonymous.

## Connections Between Masztal's Professional Contexts and What Happens in Her Classroom

As this report has demonstrated, Masztal's identification as an exemplary teacher is justified. As a professional educator she is hardworking, enthusiastic, creative, innovative, and cooperative. Her administrators, her peers, and her students alike respect her dedication, leadership, and professionalism. On a more personal level, they feel warmly toward her. Her personality helps explain why she is the very good and well-liked teacher that she is, but in and of itself is an inadequate explanation for her success. Masztal is an exemplary teacher not only because she is a good person doing a good job and ever hungry to learn more about how to do an even better job, but also because she has access to and takes advantage of organizations like NCTE and DCCTE, organizations that help her to keep up with her ever-changing field. She is exemplary because she works at a cutting-edge school that is truly engaged in helping teachers develop their talents and in making students' educational experiences meaningful and valuable, and because she has found individuals within that school who not only share but help her develop her pedagogical values and methodologies. She is exemplary because the district office for language arts in which she works is an active, hands-on office that is always doing what it can to help English/language arts teachers become better, more informed teachers.

This larger professional universe to which Masztal belongs has a direct impact on what happens every day in her classroom. The very fact that she teaches in a Coalition of Essential Schools institution that has adopted an academy system means that Masztal's daily classroom activities are shaped by her students' needs to develop their skills and knowledge as future agriculturalists. The kinds of projects that they do, the kinds of literature they read, the kinds of papers they write, and the kinds of presentations they make all are directly affected by their being Agriscience Academy students.

What happens in Masztal's classroom is also affected by the kinds of collaborative planning she does with her colleagues. If, for example, Bermudez had never been a teacher at Turner, it is almost certain that Masztal would not be the teacher she is. Many of the ideas for projects that Masztal's students engage in have come directly from Bermudez's and Masztal's frequent brainstorming sessions.

What happens in Masztal's classroom is also a result of the meetings of her Agriscience Academy team and her Critical Friends Group. Ideas that become enacted in the classroom are both generated and refined in these meetings.

Finally, Masztal's students have been enormously enriched by the fact that Masztal's district language arts office is such a dynamic and involved one. Many more examples could be added to the ones already given, of how ideas worked on and disseminated from "downtown" have found their way to Masztal's students.

## Conclusions

This portrait of one exemplary teacher, Janas Masztal, does not attempt to weigh or quantify the relative value of the various elements identified in the study that contribute to making her the powerfully effective educator she is. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that each of these elements – her personality, her educational experiences, the school she works in and the people she works for and with, the students she teaches, her professional affiliations, the district she works in – contributes to who Masztal is as an exemplary educator, how she's come to be one, and why she is ever-in-the-making.

By identifying these various factors, we educators can begin to talk about how we might benefit from understanding the ways in which they contribute to the ongoing professional development of other teachers. On the institutional scale, we can make the case that for certain kinds of students at least (perhaps most), institutional structures such as the academy structure employed at Turner, a structure that permits teachers to know all the students well and in various contexts both within and outside the classroom, seem to have positive effects on students' involvement in their own education, on their achievement, and on their sense of the possibility of a good and worthwhile future. What's more, we have seen in Masztal's case that such a structure

has had a strong motivational effect on the teacher herself, whose belief in it makes her more enthusiastic and effective.

Turner's structure also enables, encourages, and provides time for its faculty to belong to teams and Critical Friends Groups, which is another element that educators would be wise to examine and perhaps find ways of replicating. Good teachers long for the kinds of professional exchanges and growth opportunities that teams and CFGs afford. Yet for many teachers, opportunities to get real, structured, critical feedback on all aspects of their teaching are extremely rare. The fact that Masztal is not a "lone ranger," but rather part of several larger groups with common pedagogical goals, enhances her professional life and contributes to her status as exemplary teacher.

The language arts department of the district in which Masztal works seems uniquely involved in the ongoing professional development of its teachers. It seeks out the best new educational movements, strategies, and methodologies; learns about them; applies them to the particular needs of the teachers of the district; and then provides hundreds of hours of workshops to disseminate these ideas. Masztal has greatly benefitted from interactions with "downtown." Language arts district offices from around the country stand to gain a great deal from finding out as much as they can about the Dade County language arts district office and its relationship with the teachers of the district.[3]

On the micro-level, educators can learn from looking at aspects of Masztal's personality, for example her relentless desire to change and learn, and promote these qualities as extremely important ones for all potential educators to either possess or to develop. If Masztal were not the hungry teacher she is, most if not all of the other contributing factors to her success as a teacher would be irrelevant, for she is wise enough to recognize good sources when she sees them, and energetic enough to go out and take from them all that she can.

A reminder and last word: not everything in Masztal's professional life is perfect. Masztal would like to meet more often with the members of the English department, for example, to exchange ideas and "talk English." She'd also like to see all the members of her academy team work more cohesively and follow through consistently on things like project plans. Because of her resourcefulness, however, Masztal finds ways of getting the support she needs: from her CFG, from the district, from colleagues, from professional meetings and literature.

Things are not perfect, but all in all, they're pretty good.

## Endnotes

1. With the exception of the students, all the names in this case study are real.

2. Since the time of the observations on which this report is based, Bermudez has accepted a position "downtown" at the Dade County District office's history division.

3. Other case studies in this series, particularly *Interactions between Central Office Language Arts Administrators and Exemplary English Teachers, and the Impact on Student Performance*, by Carla Confer (Case Study Number 12003) and *Beating the Odds Over Time: One District's Perspective* by Sallie Snyder (Case Study Number 12004), focus on the role of the district office and its staff.

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Nystrand, M., with Gamoran, A., Kachur, R., & Prendergast, C. (1996). *Opening Dialogue: Understanding the Dynamics of Language and Learning in the English Classroom.* New York: Teachers College Press.

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2. Clarity

| | Very well | | | | Not at all | |
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